Bonni: [00:00:00] We're there in the classroom. We've prepared the questions. We begin to ask them. No one answers. Episode 15 of Teaching in Higher Ed: How to get students to participate in discussion.

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Bonni: [00:00:25] Welcome to this episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. This is the space where we explore the art and science of being more effective at facilitating learning. We also share ways to increase our personal productivity approaches. So we can have more peace in our lives and be even more present for our students.

Bonni: [00:00:50] This is Bonni Stachowiak and today I am joined by Dr. Steven Brookfield the John Ireland endowed Chair from the University of St. Thomas in Minneapolis Minnesota. Welcome Dr. Brookfield.

Stephen: [00:01:04] Well thank you Bonni I'm very happy to be here doing this.

Bonni: [00:01:07] Well I'm thrilled to have you and I think the biggest challenge that I have is trying to encompass your career in a few sentences so we can get to the meat of the discussion. As I mentioned before we started recording.

Bonni: [00:01:20] You have just an amazing career that has spanned a lot of different areas but all of them focused on adult learning and teaching on critical thinking discussion methods and Critical Theory. You began your career in 1970. You've taught in England Canada Australia and the United States in a lot of different settings and have written co written or edited 16 books on all those topics I just mentioned.

Bonni: [00:01:50] Are you exhausted already? I want to mention before we even dive into the questions for anyone listening. Dr. Brookfield has a terrific website

with a lot of different resources. He has the PDF files for his workbooks for different workshops that he offers.

Bonni: [00:02:10] He has some PowerPoint presentations and a lot of other references too. So do be sure to check out the show notes for this episode that are at teachinginhighered.com/15. Anything else left out of your bio that's really important before I start asking you questions?

Stephen: [00:02:29] Well I think the only thing is that what I would really rather be doing with my life is making a living from my band which is called The 99ers. But since that's not an option I do education. I love doing it.

Bonni: [00:02:47] Well it's it's interesting that you would say that because I did go click on the link and listen to your band and had so much fun it. I wondered if it was like an alter ego for you because it didn't seem to match up with the education career and then just this great fun lively band.

Stephen: [00:03:05] Well you know in education I think that combination is so privileged work gets rewarded is being carefully considered and articulate. Playing music especially the kind of punk rock and rockabilly rock and roll stuff that we play is it's visceral.

Stephen: [00:03:27] So it brings a completely different part of your being into existence. So I love the fact that I have this very visceral emotional side right front and center in my life which is a nice contrast to the very critically thoughtful reflective cognitive element of thinking about teaching.

Bonni: [00:03:57] Yeah but so you get to get to exercise both. But if you could do anything else you'd be with that band it sounds like

Stephen: [00:04:03] Yes I would.

Bonni: [00:04:05] Well since we're not going to have the band playing on today's show I should start asking you questions. Let's start by defining our terms. What is a discussion.

Stephen: [00:04:14] Well typically people tend to define or recognize a discussion when people are talking and having people talking is not a discussion per se. In fact I think you're going to have silent discussions. One of my favorite techniques will probably tell you that later that I stole from Hilton Smith.

Stephen: [00:04:39] It's called Chalk Talk which is where you will have a discussion that's completely silent. That happens in writing and then in images on a chalkboard or on a white board or on a screen. So for me discussion is when a majority of learners are involved and exploring some topic that is of mutual concern to them and in exploring that topic that trying to gauge it multiple shades

Stephen: [00:05:17] And deepen their understanding of it by taking into account other people's views on it. So you can do that in multiple ways. You can seek to understand something more deeply by reading lots of authors on that and in a sense I suppose you could argue that you're having a discussion.

Stephen: [00:05:37] The trouble trouble is with that the author then can't talk back to you. So it's it's a constant and continuing exchange of perceptions and views. And different understandings. New questions that are being raised examples that are being provided for points already made to me.

Stephen: [00:06:01] That's what a discussion is a disciplined and focused neutral exploration of a topic but one in which people are constantly exchanging different viewpoints and raising different questions on that topic.

Bonni: [00:06:16] What then is teaching with discussion?

Stephen: [00:06:21] Teaching with discussion is creating the conditions under which that kind of to and froing can take place and I don't think teaching through discussion is walking into the class and saying we're going to have a discussion today.

Stephen: [00:06:37] Here's the question: What do you think about this guys and then hoping that a mysterious chemistry will suddenly combust and people will be galvanized into wonderful exchange? I mean that may happen on rare occasions. But from my point of view teaching through discussion is very intentionally creating the conditions structuring protocols that govern the way that people interact with each other.

Stephen: [00:07:13] And then your role as the facilitator while it's multiple as it always is in all kinds of teaching. But you are as much concerned with making sure that protocols are being followed and that space is being created for everybody to speak.

Stephen: [00:07:31] That's as much a part of your teaching job as is checking on for understanding of content which is also important and necessary. But one of those situations where you really have multiple roles and identities which.

Stephen: [00:07:46] You Know I don't think is that uncommon in college teaching unless told all that you do is go in and just talk uninterruptedly you know and then I guess you can ignore pretty much what's going. Anything else is going on in the room. As you depart from that you have multiple multiple roles and identities.

Bonni: [00:08:08] I'm glad that you brought that up because we are having this discussion here making the assumption that anyone who's listening actually wants to get better at teaching because I get sometimes tempted to talk about that.

Bonni: [00:08:21] When I see colleagues or people at other institutions where it wouldn't matter if the room was full of people or not they're just the more robotic that - your typical lecture. But in this particular dialogue today I want us to just talk about people who want to get better at teaching.

Bonni: [00:08:41] And likely as you said they already are creating somewhat of an environment for discussion. But you've been running these workshops all over the world and for years now worked with educators. I would imagine over a thousand educators that's probably a low number. What are some of the things that you see us doing that tend to hold us back from being effective at creating an environment for discussion.

Stephen: [00:09:06] Well I think there's a sort of overall metaphor that we unconsciously internalize which is teaching as performance. So the teacher of the Year awards for example typically go to charismatic teachers who are energetic and very alive in the classroom and extremely animated. You don't tend to get Teacher of the Year awards going to people who create the conditions for good discussion to happen...

Stephen: [00:09:42] Occasionally interject but don't do much else that's almost seen I think in this teaching of performance paradigm as not teaching but I think that...

Stephen: [00:09:55] So for me that's one of the biggest obstacles is that we tend to think that teaching is us talking and dispensing wisdom and clarifying confusion and slaying ambiguity and responding to questions in the most

articulate way that we can. And all of those things are obviously extremely important but it's only one slice of this - I don't know if a pie can be multifaceted? - but you know it's only one segment of what teaching is doing because teaching is helping learning that it's very very simple at least in my way of thinking as a teacher your job is to help learning and so you should be open to whatever way of working that helps students learn.

Stephen: [00:10:50] Now sometimes doing all the things I just mentioned you know being a really good lecturer who is animated and charismatic and buzzing around the room and just a bundle of energy that is exactly what's called for.

Stephen: [00:11:06] But there were other times I would argue when you're taking students more deeply into dealing with complexity and I think that's what discussion is particularly suited for to helping uncover the complexities of whatever content it is that you're exploring you know when you do that you have to work in different ways.

Stephen: [00:11:29] You have to engineer opportunities for people just to be silent and think and not be embarrassed by silence in the classroom. You have to intervene to engineer opportunities for people to ask good questions of each other to provide examples that clarify a point that's already been made by someone else to build on what someone else has been saying to respond to a point or to offer a different perspective or bring in a new interpretation.

Stephen: [00:12:00] And all those things I think will help students learn more deeply about the complexity of a topic and I think it's those are the kind of things that it's hard to do without using something along the lines of of discussion at least I found that in my own experience.

Bonni: [00:12:21] Did you have a time in your career as an educator where you really struggled with this and had to overcome it or was it something that maybe more came naturally that you had to discover how to teach what was natural for you to others who it may not be as natural for?

Stephen: [00:12:37] Well actually it was completely opposite. It was very unnatural. As a student, I hated discussion. I would much rather sit at the back of the room take notes by myself not on my own reading.

Stephen: [00:12:52] And I hated to get to classes in which we when we ran seminar breakout sections and we were expected to discuss the topic. And the

reason I hated it was because I would get very nervous. I'd have performance anxiety my notion of what being a good student was meant that in my mind I have to sound smart and articulate and say profound things and speak a lot.

Stephen: [00:13:19] And as an introvert I've found that extremely difficult. So I really dreaded discussions and then when I started teaching I didn't use discussion at all. I would I was just the most traditional teacher you can imagine. I remember my first couple of years standing in front of the room reading my notes basically taking the notes which the students already had.

Stephen: [00:13:45] Because I printed them out beforehand. So it took me a long time to realize that as I move from teaching 15 to 16 year old and then moved into working with an adult. If I was going to get them to deal with any kind of deep learning or complexity I had to stop doing that. And I had to broaden my repertoire.

Stephen: [00:14:11] I'm bringing a lot more discretion but then I found it really hard to do that because I was working along this model of what you bring in a terrifically provocative question you raise it and then the question is going to be so good that people will be jumping over each other to contribute to a conversation. And of course that only happens very very rarely.

Stephen: [00:14:34] So I realized I really need to research what this dynamic of discussion entails and in particular I have to be aware that I think for students the thing that stops them speaking or at least one of them is that performance anxiety.

Stephen: [00:14:51] We don't want to take the risk of saying something that's wrong or that looks foolish so we'll just play it safe and we'll let the one or two raving extroverts in the group answer the questions because there's typically always you know a couple of students who will do that.

Stephen: [00:15:12] So what I have to do really well is think through how do I break this internal norm that students bring to higher education which says the well to be good in discussion participation. I have to be smart and profound and say a lot, show I know that I really know the material. So so I developed a something that's on my home page and I encourage people to go and steal it and change and adapt it to whatever they are dealing with.

Stephen: [00:15:40] I developed a grading rubric for participator student participation. So if you go onto StephenBrookfield.com click on the workshop

materials link which is on the top right hand corner. You'll see a number of PDF files and I think the last thing on the PDF finals is a classroom participation rubric.

Stephen: [00:16:02] And I put that in the syllabus when I go through it with the students and it contains about 20 behaviors that I'm looking for as examples of good discussion participation. Pretty much all of the behaviors are you know asking questions of others.

Stephen: [00:16:21] Building on something that someone has already said drawing connections between two comments that have already been made pointing out differences. Asking for a moment's silence. Bringing in a new resort to the room.

Stephen: [00:16:36] You know none of the behaviors are of the "Be Smart" "Sound Profound" and talk a lot variety so I've really thought very very deeply about how to go against the internalized norms that students have and the internalized image of a good discussion looking like a roundtable which is what I think teachers have and just understand that it is you know it involves a lot of pauses, a lot of silence and it's essentially the listening part of it is the most crucial element to it.

Stephen: [00:17:19] So a lot of the early protocols I use you know in a beginning class when people just come into a program are training them into listening carefully and responding based on careful listening to something somebody else has said. And they also typically start with mandatory silence. Thinking time.

Stephen: [00:17:42] I realize one of my biggest mistakes as a teacher was to walk into the room say here's a topic for discussion posed the question and then expect a speech to erupt with no period of reflection or thinking. So I just built that now very intentionally into discussion protocols I use.

Stephen: [00:18:06] And even when a discussion is really going well I have a rule. I have a little thing called structured silence where every 15 minutes I try and call for a minute or two. Silence. And I say before we go into our next kind of discussion segment just take a minute to think about the point that you think is the most important one that's made in the last 15 minutes

Stephen: [00:18:31] Or what's the question that had been posed for you that you'd like to talk a bit more about in the next 15 minutes or what about the topic so far is most confusing or puzzling the kind of small classroom assessment technique device.

Stephen: [00:18:53] And then I get students to post their responses on social media that I always have in my classroom I have the screen up with either a Twitter feed - live Twitter feed. I also use a tool called TodaysMeet todaysmeet.com which is fantastic. I go in about a minute before the class starts or 30 seconds of students coming in.

Stephen: [00:19:18] I pull TodaysMeet up and I create a a room where people can post responses using completely fictional identities to questions that I posed throughout the class. So those who were listening. If you've not used TodaysMeet. Just go and check that out because it's a great tool particularly for students who are quieter more diffident for whom English is not their first language.

Stephen: [00:19:48] I found I get way more participation by bringing that kind of social media regularly than just asking students OK who has questions.

Bonni: [00:19:58] Yeah. One of the themes I'm hearing you talk about is really providing an environment that does... I don't want to say protect because I don't think that's the right word... But, I was going to say protect the introvert but you really help create the fertile soil for them to learn.

Bonni: [00:20:20] I was thinking about Susan Cain's work. For those of you who are listening. She wrote the book Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking. And in her research she talks a lot about and I'm sure you've sounds like you're familiar with her work and you are familiar with the research on introverts that they are less likely to be promoted.

Bonni: [00:20:41] And I don't know if that would be going too far but to say discriminated against in some ways in at least the business world and in education as well. So but at the same time I think the other thinkers that I've read and I believe Susan came to say to an extent let's have the fertile soil.

Bonni: [00:21:02] But let's also recognize that that discrimination exists so can we help to build their confidence and competence to be able to respond perhaps a little bit more like an extrovert. I don't know if that - does not resonate at all?

Stephen: [00:21:16] Oh absolutely. And I love the fact that that book got so much popular attention. I think all the extroverts in this country just breathed a big sigh of relief - the introverts, I mean, sorry, like myself.

Bonni: [00:21:30] Yeah.

Stephen: [00:21:32] And you're right it's it's not protecting them because protecting them and without sense is what they're doing by not participating. You know they're just saying OK we'll let the extroverts run things.

Stephen: [00:21:45] It's more creating the conditions under which they can participate. So I'm very interested in finding every way possible to bring introverts into the conversation and to stop extroverts moving immediately to dominate the proceedings. So I love it when extroverts in a class sort or teachers in a professional workshop who are extroverts say, "You know I've never really thought about how many introverts I'm not really serving by doing the things that I'm always doing and privileging talk so much in class."

Stephen: [00:22:28] So I'm really trying through all my activities to create opportunities for introverts to have their say to bring that perspective and make sure that we don't miss a lot of the really good ideas that they have.

Stephen: [00:22:46] But they just don't share because they're too diffident or like me suffer from performance anxiety or whatever to them feel that they're well I have to say significant or important enough. So for an introvert to post something on a chalk talk board or to have a comment pulled up on a screen and then have people really focus on it and want to talk about them and explore it and probe it more deeply.

Stephen: [00:23:18] That's just a very affirming thing for them. Hopefully it does build the confidence for them to think that I really do have something to offer and maybe to move to to see speaking more quickly.

Stephen: [00:23:33] But in my own meetings I mean I use all these tools that we talked about in the classroom as meeting tools I use. I will introduce a new agenda item and a team or department meeting will do what you want to call it or we'll do circle of voices or circular response specific protocols which deliberately create the opportunity for everybody to participate and the least pressured way possible to stop the extroverts dominating from the outset.

Stephen: [00:24:04] So I think these are incredibly adaptable and in fact right now my colleague and I Stephen Preskill are working on a book which is going to be a very short book called The discussion book that's going to come out probably sometime next year. And its subtitle is called 50 Great ways to get people talking and we have 50 techniques that we see and have used.

Stephen: [00:24:29] We've used them in corporations. Higher ed. The Occupy movement. The military. All the multiple contacts that we consult in. And so for me this is part of living in a democracy and trying to actualize democracy.

Stephen: [00:24:50] These kind of specific approaches are the way I think you translate the lofty rhetoric of democratic participation into the day to day in the minutiae of how we run a meeting or make a decision in a work unit, or an organization or a community.

Bonni: [00:25:11] What is your perception of those who to get the students to do the reading before they come into the environment use fear as a motivator. So an example would be if you come and I ask you a question and you don't answer it, you're going to be asked to leave - - by the way not something that I do but I know that there is a colleague who does it and actually is highly rated perhaps because of the charisma element that you talked about but that's a technique that students both fear not wanting that punitive being kicked out of the class. But at the same time really seems to get the job done.

Bonni: [00:25:53] I have obviously mixed feelings wondering what your response is.

Stephen: [00:25:56] Well my fundamental understanding of teaching is that it's just riven with contradictions and is highly contextual. So in the past when I would've said never do a or b like you know have one point in my career when I'm being converted to discussion and I was extremely critical of lecturing and then I realized that the knee jerk dismissal of that was ridiculous and then another...

Stephen: [00:26:25] More recently I've become aware of the fact that I do have power in the classroom I have authority and being authoritative is not the same as being authoritarian or abusive it just means that you have credibility in students eyes and you need to use it well.

Stephen: [00:26:42] I've seen what happens for some students when I'm very laissez faire. They really resent that because they feel well I've done the work. But you're giving a pass to people who haven't done it. That's unfair on me so I'll just won't bother to do the work.

Stephen: [00:27:01] So you know I wouldn't reject that particular technique out of hand. If for me it would depend a lot on what I knew about those particular group of students.

Stephen: [00:27:17] Perhaps if they had been used to working in an environment like that that would seem actually quite familiar to them and might be the thing that would really get them moving. It would depend on how also I built the case for that to happen.

Stephen: [00:27:38] What I would probably do is not do that, initially. Because that just doesn't fit my personality. But if I tried other things and clearly none of them was working then I think my responsibility as a teacher is to say, "OK let's think out of the box and think about what might work if reading truly is a precondition of good learning to happen."

Stephen: [00:28:05] And if I want students to know you have a responsibility to your peers here it's not just my responsibility to teach. You know I need to build a case why you have a responsibility to be peers helping each other. And if I really do absolutely believe that then I have to find ways to make sure there are consequences for people who don't take that seriously.

Stephen: [00:28:30] So no I wouldn't reject it out of hand but I would I would do it much later in my realm of strategies. That wouldn't be the first thing that I would try. But you know I've never done it but that's not to say I won't.

Bonni: [00:28:47] Yeah I really appreciate you talking about just that things do vary so much on context and then what might be might really work well for one person might not work well for someone else so that's that's what I love that and I'm really looking forward to the book coming out. It's going to be great.

Bonni: [00:29:04] What have I not asked you about that is critical for us to understand getting discussion to happen in the classroom?

Stephen: [00:29:14] I think one thing that we haven't really talked about yet is the role of modeling what discussion looks like and I realize I've really fallen short on this for years and years and years as a solo teacher. I've said to students you know I really want to move to a discussion now because through discussion we engage with complexity and so on and so forth everything I said earlier.

Stephen: [00:29:44] So let's discuss and we move into it without them ever seeing me model my own commitment to discussion. And it's one of the reasons why

there's one. One change I could make in terms of higher ed at least the pedagogical aspect it would be that every course his team taught unless there's a strong reason why it shouldn't be because

Stephen: [00:30:09] I think in one of the multiple benefits of team teaching properly done is that students have a model for them of two or three instructors engaging with complexity and being open to each other's viewpoints and really hearing what each other says and asking questions and pointing out differences and similarities.

Stephen: [00:30:32] So I'm always interested in how when I'm teaching so cannot model that and it's extremely difficult but I've come up with a few different ways of trying to do that. One is when I teach online, which I do, I have an avatar called Shannon. All the students know it's me.

Stephen: [00:31:01] But Shannon post critiques of Stephen and asks Stephen tough questions and points out things that he feels Stephen is dodging and provides examples illustrate or that challenge what Stephen is talking about and then in a face to face classroom.

Stephen: [00:31:20] I like to do the kind of Clint Eastwood chair thing that he did at the convention when he spoke to an empty chair as if Obama were sitting. So I'll be speaking in one part of the room and then I'll move over to another part of the room look back at where I was sitting and address myself for Stephen and say Stephen you know I think maybe one of the assumptions that your arguments really grounded on that need to be more examination is such and such.

Stephen: [00:31:51] What do you think about that. Or Stephen what would you say to the criticism that you know x makes about the particular argument or the evidence that so-and-so research that so-and-so has produced that cause your contentions in the question and then I'll go back to where I was sitting and I'll answer the questions I pose myself.

Stephen: [00:32:13] It's a little bit hokey and laborious but it tries to get across to students that those are the kinds of things I'm looking for in discussion and I'll tell them that's why I'm doing this. I'm trying to do my best. The model for you the kinds of things that I feel it's important we do it in a discussion.

Bonni: [00:32:36] I'm starting my 10th year of teaching in higher ed and that's my biggest challenge to myself this semester is to continually explain why I'm doing

things. I do teach considerably differently than some of my other colleagues so within my class itself we have to unlearn some of the norms from other classes and then learn to do things a lot differently.

Bonni: [00:33:01] And so it's don't just tell them we're doing this but explain why explain why explain why so. I love that you're modeling that for me.

Stephen: [00:33:09] Well it's interesting to me. I've been doing classroom assessment exercise called the Critical Incident questionnaire for about 20- 22 years now. And one of the most consistent responses across thousands and thousands of students is all workshop participants is that we we really appreciate whenever you explain why you're doing what you're doing and what the point of an exercise is.

Stephen: [00:33:40] And so I've written in the Skillful Teacher about a book coming out about the notion of of credibility and how students judge that you are a credible teacher that they can have confidence in them feel that your skills guide leading them along a learning journey. And it's interesting that your ability to give a clear rationale for why you're doing what you're doing and to keep doing that.

Stephen: [00:34:05] To have just as a permanent feature of what you do that gets such consistently high ratings across incredibly valid contexts. It's been very striking to me so like you I've really tried to be much more intentional about that.

Bonni: [00:34:24] How do we create the conditions to facilitate effective discussion?

Stephen: [00:34:30] Well I think we start with something like the rubric and then we introduced initial protocols and you'll find these on the Web site like the circle of voices which is something where you give a question you mandate maybe a couple of minutes silence thinking about it.

Stephen: [00:34:51] Have students in small groups give their initial response to the question but they go around their small group and no one is allowed to interrupt each other when they're given that and they should respond. And then the groups move into small group conversation. But the ground rule is that you can only talk about what somebody else has said in the opening round.

Stephen: [00:35:15] The really simple exercise I do it at the beginning of most of my courses with multiple learners and I'm telling them what I'm trying to do is to

socialize you into understanding that silent thinking time and I'm listening carefully are both incredibly important elements in a discussion with them. It's not just talk and saying what you think and explaining what you think to others though.

Stephen: [00:35:47] So I think we have to model it. We have to structure or award system that rewards those things and then over time we have to introduce protocols that can actually demonstrate what we're talking about.

Bonni: [00:36:03] Thank you so much. I'm going to move now to the part of the show where we each make a recommendation. Mine is just a mention to the listeners if you didn't read this in this week's tech news. Google changed things up a little bit and has integrated their Google Voice product with their Google Hangouts.

Bonni: [00:36:21] Google Voice is where I can have a phone number and have people leave messages a lot of people in higher ed have that as their phone line if they're perhaps phone number at the university isn't quite as robust in features as they might like it and hangouts are where we can have synchronous discussions we can even do screen sharing in there.

Bonni: [00:36:41] The fact that both of these are now integrated is just to me making it worth another look. I think the one plus one is equaling three in this case and it's going to be interesting to see what the those who really innovate in educational technologies come up with how to use these tools as they are integrated. And how about you Stephen what's your recommendation.

Stephen: [00:37:01] My recommendation I guess is more global Bonni. It's to make sure that as you're making decisions as a teacher on which instructional approaches to use say which assignments to set and so on try and find some way of researching how the students are responding to your teaching how they're experiencing that learning on a regular basis.

Stephen: [00:37:27] Don't wait until the end of course test to find out about that. So again if you go to my home page StephenBrookfield.com on the top left hand side there was a link to the classroom critical incident questionnaire it's a tool I developed I've used for a long time.

Stephen: [00:37:46] You can click on the link download the tool use that you don't need to ask me permission to use any of the stuff in my home page. That's

a weekly way of finding out how students are responding to the call to their learning and I use that information to make my decisions as a teacher.

Bonni: [00:38:07] Well I just appreciate you so much taking a bit of a risk on me someone that you had never heard of before and to really invest your time for our listeners. The one criteria that you had for me was that this information is freely available and I believe in working out loud getting better at what I do by fumbling along and getting to talk to someone like you is such an honor.

Bonni: [00:38:28] Thank you so much for being a guest on Teaching in Higher Ed.

Stephen: [00:38:31] Oh absolutely. My pleasure, Bonni. Thank you.

Bonni: [00:38:35] Thanks for listening to this episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. If You haven't already, I would highly suggest that you subscribe to our weekly update. You can find it at teachinginhighered.com/subscribe.

Bonni: [00:38:49] When you subscribe you get the weekly teaching article and you also get the notes from podcasts like the one you're listening to right now with all the great links that were mentioned by today's guests.

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